

Skagit Wildlife Area Advisory Committee Meeting

Final Meeting Notes

June 26, 2019
Burlington Public Library,

Attendees

Wildlife Area Advisory Committee (WAAC) Members

- Rick Billieu – Washington Waterfowl Association
- Thomas Breckenridge – Skagit Valley College – Student
- Richard Brocksmith – Skagit Watershed Council
- Roger Fuller – Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve
- Jed Holmes – Birds of Winter
- Art Kendall – Washington Waterfowl Association
- Martha Jordan – Northwest Swan Conservation Association
- Brandon Roozen – Western Washington Agriculture Association
- Kara Symonds – Skagit County Natural Resources Division
- Bruce Thompson – Washington Chapter – The Wildlife Society
- Alice Turner – Skagit Audubon

WDFW

- Loren Brokaw, Acting Wildlife Regional Program Manager
- Belinda Rotton, Skagit Wildlife Area Manager
- Lauri Vigue, Project Manager

Welcome & Introductions – Loren Brokaw

Loren welcomed everyone to the meeting. He emphasized the value of the advisory committee to the wildlife area planning process.

Skagit Wildlife Area Planning & Process – Lauri

The purpose of the meeting is to introduce the WAAC to the planning process and to collect comments as part of the external process – Phase 1. The internal scoping meeting occurred in December 12, 2018 at the Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) and the public open house occurred on March 28th at NERR. The agenda was reviewed and the WAAC was introduced to the agency mission, strategic plan goals, and the purpose of the wildlife area plan; several examples of completed plans were provided:

- The plan is for 10 years
- Public involvement
- Ensures lands are managed consistent with mission and funding obligations
- Identifies priority actions and integrates the work of all agency programs
- Integrates fish, habitat, wildlife and enforcement programs

Roles & Expectations - Lauri

The draft charter was provided at the meeting and will be sent out to the group for comments, which outlines roles and responsibilities. Lauri described the role of the committee, including sharing information and providing feedback from the groups that advisory committee members represent. Decisions are ultimately the responsibility of the department but the hope is that the committee can work together and come to consensus when possible. She outlined discussion guidelines and mentioned the Wildlife Area Management Planning Framework document, which summarizes agency priorities and programs that guide all wildlife areas.

Lauri will provide to the WAAC members, a link to the Framework document, a copy of the draft charter, and the draft meeting notes.

The website address for the Skagit Wildlife Area Advisory Committee is <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/advisory/s-waac>. All materials from the meetings will be added to this website including notes, charter, agendas, and meeting dates.

Draft Schedule

The public open house for the Skagit Sound Wildlife Area occurred in March 2019. Planning team meetings will startup in July 2019 and a draft plan is estimated to be completed for WAAC review in 2020.

Skagit WLA Overview - Belinda

There are 20 units within the Skagit Wildlife Area, totaling 17,000 acres. The units include Fir Island Farm, Headquarters, Debay Slough, Island, Leque Island, Samish, Samish River, Skagit Bay, South Padilla Bay, Bald Eagle Natural Area Preserve, Camano Island, Cottonwood Island, Goat Island, Guemes Island, Jackman Creek, Killebrew Lake Natural Area Preserve, Lopez Island, Milltown Island, Sinclair Island, and Telegraph Slough.

Fir Island Farm Unit:

Overview: 225 acres of agriculture fields and intertidal estuary acquired in 1995.

Purpose: Provide winter forage for waterfowl primarily snow geese. In 2016, 131 acres were restored to estuary.

Current Objectives: Provide winter forage and manage restored habitats for wildlife and priority fish species. Evaluate current management and need for reserve status.

Recreation: Wildlife viewing limited access due to reserve status

Funding Source: North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) and Recreation Conservation Office (RCO) – Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP)

Headquarters Unit:

Overview: 170 acres intertidal estuary acquired in 1951

Purpose: Waterfowl forage and hunting access, diked in during the late 50's and early 60's to provide upland forage for waterfowl and hunting access.

Current Objectives: Monitor and maintain restored habitat for priority fish and wildlife species, restored in 2009. Provide hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Recreation: Hunting, bird watching, photography, and dog walking.

Funding Source: Pittman Robertson (PR), National Park Service (NPS) – Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), and RCO - WWRP

Debay Slough:

Overview: 418 acres agricultural fields, riparian forest, oxbow and freshwater wetlands. Acquired in 1954-2010

Purpose: Provide winter forage for waterfowl primarily swan. Game reserve with a small hunt unit. Historically important high roost for swans.

Current objective: Provide winter forage for waterfowl. Evaluate current management and need for reserve status.

Recreation: Limited access area (reserve) and small hunt unit. Hunting, bird watching, walking (dogs on hunt unit).

Funding Source: PR, Wildlife Fund, NAWCA and RCO (WWRP) funding

Island Unit:

Overview: 326 acres of agricultural fields, managed seasonal wetlands, permanent wetlands, and mixed riparian forest.

Purpose: Provide winter forage for waterfowl and hunting access. In 1999-2000 portion of the site restored to estuary.

Current Objectives: Provide winter waterfowl forage and hunting access. Monitor and manage existing restoration area. Evaluate additional enhancement and restoration proposals.

Recreation: Hunting and walkers - Boat access only

Funding Source: USFWS – PR and WDFW – Wildlife fund

Leque Island Unit:

Overview: 474 acres agricultural fields and intertidal estuary

Purpose: Provide winter waterfowl forage and pheasant release site.

Current Objectives: Estuary restoration and provide public hunting and viewing opportunities.

Recreation: Hunting, bird watching, and photography

Funding Source: WDFW –Wildlife Fund, RCO – WWRP, NAWCA, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Coastal Wetlands, RCO – Salmon Recovery Funding Board

Samish Unit:

Overview: 410 acres agricultural fields and seasonal managed wetlands

Purpose: Provides winter forage for dabbling ducks

Current Objectives: Manage habitat to provide winter forage for waterfowl and seasonal wetlands and provide public hunting opportunities.

Recreation: Hunting and wildlife viewing

Funding Source: NAWCA and RCO - WWRP

Samish River Unit:

Overview: 100 acres of fallow agricultural ground with mixed native and pasture grasses.

Purpose: Conservation – Natural Resources Conservation Service - Wetland Reserve Conservation Easement

Current Objectives: Manage within restrictions of the Conservation easement and try to develop improved wetland enhancements and forage where possible.

Recreation: Hunting and Wildlife viewing. Develop parking on site with RCO funding

Funding Source: Ducks Unlimited Donation and NAWCA

Skagit Bay Estuary Unit:

Overview: 6,810 acres intertidal estuary

Purpose: Conservation – Conservation of intertidal estuary

Current Objectives: Maintain and restore habitat for priority fish species, provide public hunting opportunities.

Recreation: Hunting and wildlife viewing

Funding Source: USFWS – PR, WDFW - Wildlife Fund, and RCO

South Padilla Bay Unit:

Overview: 267 acres agricultural fields

Purpose: Acquired to restore estuary for Salmon recovery

Current Objectives: Maintain agricultural program until long-term plan can be developed for site.

Recreation: Hunting and wildlife viewing

Funding Source: RCO – Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account (ALEA), and USFWS – Coastal Wetland

Bald Eagle Natural Area Preserve:

Overview: 653 acres of riparian forest along the Skagit River with remnant channels of the Skagit and Sauk Rivers with mixed conifer forest.

Purpose: Acquired by the Department of Game in 1977 for conservation of bald eagle winter forage and roost sites. Other species benefits include forest species such as bear, deer, elk, cougars and grouse.

Current Objectives: Maintain habitat for priority wildlife species. Evaluate the Natural Area Plan/designation and forest enhancement opportunities.

Recreation: Parcels vary in accessibility. Not all have roads or legal access across private property. Access from water an option. Natural area review may restrict public access development.

Funding Source: RCO

Camano Island Unit

Overview: 64 acres acquired in 1960 and 2003

Purpose: Conservation of intertidal estuary for waterfowl; protection of great blue heron rookery.

Current Objectives: Maintain and enhance habitat for priority fish and wildlife species.

Recreation: Hunting accessible by water. 32 acres closed to public access – Conservation Easement held by Whidbey Camano Land Trust.

Funding Source: WDFW - Wildlife Funds; Island County Conservation Futures Fund

Cottonwood Island/Skagit Forks Unit

Overview: 205 acres of floodplain forest within the dikes of the Skagit River. Includes oxbow and off-channel habitat.

Purpose: Conservation of floodplain forest and salmon habitat.

Current Objectives: Maintain and restore habitat for priority fish and wildlife species.

Recreation: Current legal access by water only

Funding Source: DNR transfer (2001) and Recreation and Conservation Salmon Recovery Funding Board (2008)

Goat Island Unit

Overview: 158 acres Island at the mouth of the North Fork of the Skagit River and Swinomish Channel with mixed conifer forest. Historic site of WWII gun emplacement (Fort Whitman).

Purpose: Conservation of raptor and eagle roosting habitat.

Current Objectives: No site manipulation.

Recreation: Boat access only. Interest from scouts, boaters and kayakers to improve trail and camp on site.

Funding Source: USFWS and Bureau of Land Management

Guemes Island Unit

Overview: 52 acres of Island mixed conifer with a cliff and rocky harbor access easement

Purpose: Protection of sensitive species

Current Objectives: Protect habitat for priority wildlife species. Evaluate if opportunity for limited access public hunting and recreation.

Recreation: Adjacent to Skagit Land Trust Guemes Mountain Property. Limited developed trails

Funding Source: RCO - WWRP

Jackman Creek Unit

Overview: 1,643 acres of mixed conifer forest most at higher elevations.

Purpose: Conservation land transfer from Department of Natural Resources

Current Objectives: Conservation ownership

Recreation: Limited legal access (status uncertain)

Funding Source: USFWS Section 6 and State Transfer funds

Killebrew Lake Natural Area Preserve

Overview: 151 acres

Purpose: Conservation of bog and rare plants. Provides lake and water access.

Current Objectives: Review and update natural area objectives; consider potential hunting and fishing opportunities.

Recreation: Hunting, hiking, and fishing

Funding Source: USFWS – Dingell Johnson and WDFW Wildlife Funds

Lopez Island Unit

Overview: 55 acres

Purpose: Protection of sensitive species

Current Objectives: Conservation

Recreation: Determine access and sensitive species needs.

Funding Source: Department of Natural Resources transfer and RCO - WWRP

Milltown Island Unit

Overview: 237 acres intertidal estuary

Purpose: Provide wintering waterfowl forage. Dikes failed shortly after acquisition.

Current Objectives: Improve habitat potential for fish and wildlife and improve public hunting opportunities.

Recreation: Hunting, fishing, and viewing - boat access only

Funding Source: USFWS – PR, NPS – LWCF, and County Transfer

Sinclair Island Unit

Overview: 35 acres

Purpose: Conservation of island habitat

Current Objectives: Evaluate conservation management and ownership options

Recreation: Limited access (boat in only) no public ferry to Sinclair Island

Funding Source: Donation – Mary Leech

Telegraph Slough Unit

Overview: 30 acres riparian habitat along the remnant slough

Purpose: DNR lease for public hunting access

Current Objectives: Provide public hunting opportunities.

Recreation: Hunting

Funding Source: Lease from DNR

Key Species

- Waterfowl: dabbling ducks, geese and swans
- Shorebirds
- Salmon

Key Issues (from Internal Scoping Meeting – December 2018 – Public Workshop March 2019)

- Waterfowl management
- Weed management
- Island Unit alternative analysis
- Fish monitoring data analysis
- South Padilla Bay restoration/enhancement
- Wiley Slough/Fir Island adaptive management
- Ecosystem function and monitoring for fish
- Forest health (Guemes and Killebrew)
- North Leque Island restoration funding
- Milltown restoration
- Tidegate Fish Initiative
- Upstream hydro impacts (Seattle City Light Relicensing)potential habitat enhancement funding
- Local land use – agriculture changes and the potential to influence species and recreation
- Seasonal Access to reserves
- Access and trail development
- Natural Areas Preserve (Killebrew Lake and Bald Eagle) management
- Climate change
- Goat Island historic resources
- Increasing recreation demand and balance with resource protection
- Recreation regulation – no leash dog policy
- Hunting access Bald Eagle Natural Area Preserve
- Conflicting needs of different user groups on a site

Recreation

- Walking and hiking
- Hunting – waterfowl, deer and predator
- Dog walking
- Fishing
- Wildlife viewing
- Photography

Discussion and Comments

- Question about whether these meetings are open to the public. Answer is that they are, however the discussion portions of the agenda are for WAAC members only. There is time at the end of the meeting for public comments if needed.
- Question about where the public comments are from the scoping open house. The comments are still being compiled and will be available for the WAAC.
- Fish monitoring data for the Island unit, for restoration completed 10 years ago. Where is the data? No published results. Skagit Watershed Council is willing to provide their data.
- Include bird monitoring at restoration sites (pre and post project). It was done at Leque Island and needs to be built into future projects.
- Other species needs to be taken into account. Focus on Chinook/salmon now. Steelhead and bull trout should be included on species list. The steelhead management plan should be done within a year.
- The Padilla Bay Reserve is also interested in being a partner in this process by providing boats and helping with field trips.
- Weed control budget.
- Multiple users – recreation conflicts. Need clear communication to the public - RCW signs helped with leashed dogs on the Snoqualmie WLA. No off leash dog parks on WDFW lands.
- Volunteer groups / citizen science dedicated stewards needed. Protocol and data oversight established. Examples, Pilchuck Audubon – Leque monitoring and Sound Water Stewards – Whidbey and Camano Island.
- Replacement lands funding – interest in developing funding strategy to make this successful.
- Small scale infrastructure - outside groups to contribute to development.
- Wildlife area maps – identify infrastructure, public ownership, Farmland Legacy lands, zoning and county land base and tide gates. Skagit County is a good source of information.
- Monitoring requests should be reviewed by the WAAC. Field trips are an opportunity to discuss. Internal monitoring is done by the science division, needs to provide input on volunteerism – provides better credibility with public. Prioritize monitoring, implement best plan per buck.

- Salmon recovery monitoring – should be done by credible scientists. There are data analysis issues with Wiley Slough – pre-monitoring demonstrate use – dabbling ducks in the agriculture areas. Timing is an important consideration. Monitoring should occur when the species is present.
- Bird monitoring partnerships encouraged (e.g. ornithology program - University of Washington)
- Identify Chinook recovery units in the plan.
- Recreation conflicts – birding/nesting impacts with waterfowl hunting. We need better information on how to communicate with the public.
- Consider consolidating units, perhaps surplus properties that don't fit with WDFW objectives.
- Restoration funding needed.
- Website corrections on the Skagit page needed.
- It was suggested to list issues in a table according to units.
- Add a statement in the charter that pertains to special interest groups.
- What is the most significant contribution that the WAAC can provide to the wildlife area planning process? Comments on the draft goals and objectives, and input at field trips. Focus on local rather than statewide issues. Comments can be directed to higher level, if needed. The core planning team is tied into statewide contacts, when larger issues arise.
- Using adaptive management –what have we learned? Identify the economic and social factors, and have side by side conversations. Drivers weigh in on information changes for management. We will need to identify the top concerns/key issues to focus on. The general public has vested interests in access and enhancements. Local population growth and recreation demand.
- Suggestion that perhaps each WAAC member could list the top 3 issues that they would like to spend more time discussing. Issues that are common to multiple members could be workshopped among the group.

Next Steps:

- Belinda will provide a summary of the public comments received.
- Comments are due on the draft charter by July 10th.

- Lauri will send out the draft notes for review and comment.
- WAAC members please register on the WDFW Volunteer website (CERVIS)

<https://wdfw.wa.gov/get-involved/volunteer>

Schedule

- Belinda will develop a strategy for conducting field trips. What will be the priority units to visit? Example – Leque Island, Fir Island and Headquarters showing various stages of restoration.
- The planning team will meet and develop goals and objectives over the several months (July – October).
- A draft plan will be available for WAAC review in 2020.

Note from WDFW Staff:

A large number of bird dog trainers attended the initial public scoping meeting for the Snoqualmie Wildlife Area planning process and WDFW selected a representative for the bird dog training to sit on the Wildlife Area Advisory Committee (WAAC). The bird dog training community consists of several different types of bird dog training (including retrievers, pointers, setters, etc.) and to help synthesize information among all of these types, WDFW encouraged formation of a Bird Dog Training Sub-Committee to help the WAAC member represent the bird dog training community-at-large.